

Tulane Marching Band brings nonstop energy to Mardi Gras

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The Tulane Marching Band will perform in four Mardi Gras parades this year, bringing their high-energy performances to the streets of New Orleans. (Photo by Kenny Lass)

As Mardi Gras season unfolds across New Orleans, the Tulane University Marching Band (TUMB) will once again be a familiar — and unmistakable — presence along parade routes.

This year, the band will participate in four parades, bringing nonstop music, movement and school spirit to revelers across the city.

Under the direction of interim band director Dylan Parrilla-Koester, the band will represent Tulane in the Krewe of Freret on Saturday, Feb. 7; Krewe d'Etat on Friday,

Feb. 13; Bacchus on Sunday, Feb. 15; and Rex on Mardi Gras Day, Tuesday, Feb. 17. The parades will also feature the Shockwave Dance Team.

When Parrilla-Koester talks about the band's nonstop energy, he means it — literally. Except for an occasional sip of water, the band refrains from rest, even during royalty toasts or float breakdowns when a parade may halt indefinitely.

While most marching bands alternate between full-band musical selections and percussion-only cadences to give wind players a break, TUMB takes a different approach. Every member of the band performs at all times — either playing and marching or dancing.

"It keeps the crowd energized whenever we pass by," Parrilla-Koester said.

This year's performances include more than 10 traditional and contemporary music selections and numerous drumline cadences, each featuring a signature, student-choreographed dance.

"You're moving and playing the entire time," said Ella Touchstone, a senior trumpet player from Long Beach, Mississippi. The Tulane band's relentless performance style can be strenuous, but she wouldn't have it any other way, she said.

"During Mardi Gras, we're part of the whole idea of entertainment. We're always thinking about ways to stand out and connect with the crowd."

For the band, Mardi Gras season offers a different kind of performance experience than football season.

"It moves a lot faster than football," said MaKenzie LeMott, a senior saxophonist from Alexandria, Louisiana. "We're learning new music, building strength and marching in front of much bigger crowds."

Junior clarinetist Benjamin Kenny of Jacksonville, Florida, said marching in New Orleans is unlike anything he experienced growing up.

"Here, we get to play for the community," he said. "We get tired, but we never get tired of it. It brings the whole city together, and we love giving back to them."

During certain cadences, the band counts down from five to one, with spectators joining in before the musicians and color guard break formation to interact with the

crowd.

"We have choreography to every song, so we're constantly moving," said Color Guard Captain Ava Lange, a senior from Memphis, Tennessee. "In my first year, it was the most challenging thing I had ever done."

The band's deep connection to Mardi Gras is rooted in its modern history. After the demolition of Tulane Stadium in the late 1970s, Tulane's marching band went dormant for nearly three decades. In 2003, students revived the spirit through the Soundwave Pep Band, which assembled an ad hoc marching band for homecoming and Mardi Gras performances.

With support from alumni, donors and the university administration, the modern Tulane University Marching Band officially launched in 2005. Just days after its first band camp, Hurricane Katrina made landfall — yet the new ensemble made its inaugural public debut during Mardi Gras 2006. Starting with only 25 students, the band has grown to more than 100 members.

These days, the Tulane Marching Band receives far more invitations to march than it can accept.

"The krewes want us, and they want us every single year," Parrilla-Koester said. "But our students are so busy, and they need to be able to experience Mardi Gras as part of the crowd."

At the same time, he said, the band plays an essential role in connecting the university with the city.

"We meet the community where they are — at the biggest party in the city — and our students are absolutely ambassadors for Tulane. It's important for public and community relations, and it speaks to the reciprocity and symbiosis Tulane has with New Orleans."